PREFACE

Communism – Cultural Nihilism or a Political Mistake?

The idea of communism was born in the West. The doctrines which expressed it came for the most part from France and Germany, although some regarded Sir Thomas More as the author of its first modern justification. What is more, the two tendencies, the rationalism of the Enlightenment and historicism – employed by Marxism, the most popular and successful of these doctrines – enjoyed a much stronger following in Western than in Eastern intellectual circles. Yet communism as a political system, identified with bolshevism and sovietism, came into being not in the West, but in the East. It came into existence not where the idea and its justifying doctrines had been born, but in a country whose social structure was inadequate for the Marxist project, a country whose traditions emphasized the significance not of the individual, but of centralized power, the importance not of the citizen, but of the state's subject. Implanted in such an environment, Western communism absorbed these new ideas. It gradually lost its "humanistic impulse", including the promise of the fulfillment of the eternal dream of every member of the human race, the full achievement of his humanity. To a large extent, then, it lost sight of the noble goal it had set for itself. This goal had been put forward in a society dominated by peasantry who remembered the Tsarist autocracy, largely collectivist. It had enjoyed almost no liberal traditions that emphasized the importance of individual ownership as the precondition of diversity, privacy, and hierarchy. Such a community needed not a noble goal, but an elementary order. It was not persuasion but coercion issuing from the new center of the collective that was to provide standards of behavior

for individuals, whose highest aspiration was to survive, and not to achieve the perfection of the being specific to them.

Predictions regarding a possible union between Western-born communist ideas and Eastern despotism were formulated by Polish thinkers as early as the mid-nineteenth century, both émigrés and those living under one of the three occupying powers. Deprived of their own state, Poles were already taking note of the great threat to their cultural identity, and even to the physical survival of the nation which could follow from such a union. The great romantic poet, Zygmunt Krasiński, in the poem *Dzień dzisiejszy* ("The Present Day", 1847) found "despotic communism" to be the greatest tyranny in the history of mankind, leveling individuals absolutely and putting them at the complete disposal of rulers who were leading them in a direction known only to themselves. The essence of the two elements representing the threat, that is, Western communism and Eastern despotism, was held to be the anti-cultural tendency of both. For communism required not only the abolition of property, but also the removal of all individual possession. It destroyed all honor and the spirit of community, from the smallest community, the family, to the largest, the state. Yet it destroyed much more: it eliminated traditional intermediate bodies, established political and legal institutions, the bonds that tied individuals and social groups together. It even perverted the meaning of words and of the hitherto dominant social relations established in the Christian culture of the European continent.

Eastern despotism led in an analogous direction. Like the radicals in the West, it turned against all that was stable and capable of resisting Russian imperial ambitions, especially Churches and the centuries-old hierarchy within organic nations. It denied both the particular, which is the source of the diversity of subject communities, and the universal. The intellectual and moral critical tendency shook hands with the political tendency of the East. The cause of the destruction of the traditional vision of man, obedient to God and building his identity in many natural and traditional communities, met with the cause of building a "new order" by the autocrat. Both of these causes, combined theoretically for the first time in the doctrine of Marx and Engels, were seen by Polish

critics as leading not only to *starvation and misery*, but directly to a state where humans would be closer to animals than to rational beings, animals trained by those who in the name of the noble end defined in the West would employ methods characteristic to Eastern despotism. This combination was seen as engendering rulers and owners combined into one, the sole possessors of minds and bodies. Yet this caused *human hearts to decay*, as they did not respect any principles established in the legacy of European culture. They leveled "all minds and bodies", they set up models of behavior grounded in the base passions, and they thought in terms of "who gets the better of whom", thereby destroying all mutual respect and trust among the members of the community. Polish critics perceived "slime" where the communists saw the fulfillment of human dreams. They saw "dirt" where the authors of communism perceived "angelic purity".

For them Communism was not a "political mistake"; it was, above all, an "anthropological" or "cultural" mistake, a "debasement" rather than an "elevation" of man. Communism led not only to the denial of basic individual rights and to the exclusion of individuals from their part in the political and legislative process. By removing the foundations of the cultural heritage of Europe, communism created a void: it reduced man to his physical dimension. In promising the fulfillment of humanity through the satisfaction of material needs, it accounted for only one human dimension, the material one; it dismissed the spiritual dimension, much more important according to the critics of communism and emphasized by the Christian culture that was attacked by communist adherents. Losing sight of this dimension, communism ignored the fundamental imperfection of the human body, which determines the intellectual and moral imperfection of man; it did not see that overcoming this imperfection is only possible through emancipation from physicality. The promises of communism were not as far-reaching and demanding as the standards of traditional culture, which emphasized the necessity of aiming at emancipation, but always through the overcoming of physicality. The content of these promises was simple: the satisfaction of man's basic needs, even at the cost of *property and law*, even through the institution of *the most horrible despotism conceivable*. It abolished

individual freedom and replaced it with the *incapacitation* of subjects, who *do not own property*, do not constitute traditional and natural communities but who can enjoy *equality in poverty*, who lack the *spiritual side* but accept *coarse sensuality*, who deny the *personal character of God* and the *personal character of man* based on it but are resigned to existing in a *coercive organism* which can provide arbitrary, but generally applicable standards of behavior within their community[1].

The writings of Krasiński and Szymański, Małecki and Gołuchowski, active in the mid-nineteenth century, point to the danger posed by the communist idea, growing ever more in popularity among the dominant culture, not only among private owners, but also in families and political communities, in power structures and the dominant educational systems. Fears stemming from the prediction that the communist idea was going to be realized were accompanied by apocalyptic visions of an "acultural chaos" where rulers enflamed with hatred would commit mass murder to further goals regarded by them as noble. They would employ inhuman means to carry out their plans; they would shape the citizens, fully subservient to them, into rivals obedient to their commands. This chaos calls into question the dominant standards of equity and justice, humanity and the community's respect for individuality. It would be contained only by the decisions of those who based authority on the sheer fact of possessing greater power. These shaped the political world but ignored the fact that this world forms part of a larger order. The political world does not determine the content of culture and does not possess its own justification. Instead, it derives the meaning of power and the virtues of its holders from their traditional meanings, and it erects a stable legal system on the vision of a man who is imperfect because he is composed of soul and body. The critics of communism regarded the containment of this chaos by the rulers/owners as an attempt to *square the circle in the political world*, as an *insanity* that assaulted *human individuality and nationhood*, as the setting up of *a loathsome bondage*, as the destruction of *human freedom, work, modesty, and love*, and finally, as the abolition of *all that*

[1] P. Popiel, *Choroba wieku*, [in:] *Pisma*, Cracow 1893, vol. I, pp. 247 and 240.

was noble in man in order to maintain an unnatural equality. This "acultural chaos" could not be contained solely by means of legal norms. Authors said that it should be prevented, and if it did come about, an attempt should be made at slowly, but consistently rebuilding what was destroyed and what had constituted the cultural heritage of the past. Communist visions wanted to abandon the cultural heritage of this segment of time, as they recognized only the present and the future. They announced the creation of a "new man", emancipated from this heritage which encumbered him. The communist attempt to pare down this heritage was doomed to fail from the very start since it was directed against the *two foundations of society: human freedom and property.* As such, it did not aim at *tempering* human nature, but at *remaking* it. It wanted to teach rulers how to control their slaves and to inculcate the rest with contempt for work and with love for incessant battle and robbery, the *energetic passions* of barbarians[2].

In the reflections of the nineteenth-century authors we find arguments raised later by their descendants, who were aware not only of the significance and direction of the changes taking place in Russia after the Bolshevik victory, but also of the consequences of these changes, revealing a contradiction between the declared ideal and the reality of the Soviet State. We can also perceive the beginnings of the debate regarding the place in the history of modern political thought of the communist idea and of the communist doctrine found in the writings of Marx and Engels. Critics were divided on this issue, some emphasizing the unique character of communism among modern doctrines, others regarding it only as an extreme version of other modern tendencies. Both groups were of the opinion that bolshevism, Sovietism or communism – these terms were used interchangeably to denote the communist experiment carried out by the Eastern despotism – would lead to the ultimate rupture between Russia and Western culture. This was the fundamental reason for the violent opposition of Polish thinkers to the communist threat, which was no longer potential, as in the nineteenth century, but became a reality after the October Revolution of 1917, after Soviet Russia came into being in the

[2] A. M. Szymański, *O komunizmie*, "Przegląd Poznański" 1848, vol. VIII, p. 848.

same year, and, a year later, after it waged war against the Polish State, resurrected from a century-long bondage. The Russo-Polish war was fought from 1919 to 1921 and produced great interest in the Soviet experiment among all social scientists and humanists in Poland. However, it was preceded by attempted incursions of the Bolshevik army, ordered by Lenin, into Lithuanian and Belorussian lands which Polish authorities regarded as belonging to Poland.

This war was fought not only in defense of the Polish State; it was also fought in defense of Europe; it was an answer to the Bolshevik aim of spreading the proletarian revolution onto the entire continent. This extremely bloody war in defense of Poland and Europe, concluded with the 1921 Treaty of Riga, brought attention to the Soviet experiment. Eminent jurists and economists, philosophers and theologians, ethicists and psychologists reflected on the theoretical foundations of communism realized in Soviet Russia, and, from 1922, in the Soviet Union, created from the union of Russia with Belorussia, the Ukraine, and a number of other, smaller territories. In their now more frequent and deeper analyses they were preoccupied not with the predicted outcomes of the fulfillment of the communist vision, but with the manifold results of its realization. They no longer associated communism with a vision of a Kingdom of Perfection on Earth, with the idea, or with the doctrine justifying it. They associated it with the all-embracing system which put the order cherished by the first communists on its head. For they noticed that the political dimension, in its despotic Eastern version, overshadowed the economic, social, and cultural dimension. The problem of means gained predominance over the question of ends, and hence the "humanist impulse" lost all significance in favor of the "bare fact" of capturing and consolidating power by the Bolsheviks. Revolutionary power and efficiency, forced obedience to those who justified their usurpation with arguments based on a vision of the communist future, provided legitimization for creating and enforcing the law. Yet although this legitimization was based on a bare fact, it gained substance thanks to a perspective contained in the Marxist ideology, a perspective combining Enlightenment rationalism with Hegelian historical determinism, directed towards the future and

associated with a vision of fulfilling "social justice", adapted by Lenin to Russian requirements. However, the logic of ideology was relentless: the dictatorship of the masses longing for change had to be exercised by groups capable of defining the goal, determining the means of its achievement, and imposing them on all those who took part in the experiment. The power exercised on behalf of the "collective dictator" by the leaders of the Bolshevik party became their exclusive possession. The political world was vanishing as the monopolistic party *administered* the public sphere, extending the nomenclature-based bureaucracy and replacing public opinion with commentators appointed by itself[3].

In such a state, or in the Bolshevik collectivity, as others preferred to call the Soviet entity[4], *politics became a specialization accessible only to a handful of people*, who justified the exclusion of others with the claim that *everything had to be managed from above* if the projected goal was to be achieved. In the Bolshevik State, where *one had to profess and believe in whatever was announced as the creed*, where *it was easy to slide into heresy* or *commit political blasphemy*, the "command from above" became the only common denominator for subjects leveled in their misery[5]. This command, however, was only provisional; the law, composed of such provisional commands, was not a collection of norms such as we know it in the West. It did not serve the aim of imposing a permanent order on public life, but of creating a new reality. It did not bind the organs of power and did not put a constraint on coercion; being an instrument in the hands of the "collective dictator", it could be altered at any time, if the representative of the dictator decided that other norms would better serve the achievement of the predefined goal. The *justification of the law* was no longer the fact that a greater number supported it, as was the case – according to Polish inter-war thinkers – in Western democracies, but the possession of greater physical force. Indeed, the law became only a *system of social norms, created and sustained by a specific social force*, the same one which inspired and established the norm, *adapting it to its own purposes*.

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[3] R. Rybarski, *Siła i prawo*, Warsaw 1936, p. 109.
[4] W. L. Jaworski, *Projekt konstytucji*, Cracow 1928, p. 185.
[5] R. Rybarski, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

This force *formally belonged to the proletariat* and served this class, but in fact in remained in and served the group that spoke on behalf of this class. Therefore, it was impossible to define criteria for evaluating the law and to provide reasons for opposing it[6]. It was equally impossible to find criteria for assessing the economic mechanisms employed by the Bolsheviks, since the *dictatorship of the proletariat became the medium of thinking and acting for the Bolshevik elites*, who identified themselves with the state and administered all spheres of human life. It eradicated all principles unwanted by the owners/rulers. The planned economy, managed centrally by a hugely overblown bureaucracy, was the economic equivalent of arbitrary regulation by the rulers of the public and private behavior of the subjects. It corresponded to the homogenizing attempts by Stalin directed against all "nationalisms" within the Soviet Union. The homogeneity of norms made management easier. These included the uniformization of thought and action among people reduced to the level of animals, the collectivization of agriculture and wide-scale industrialization, gulags and terror, deportations and political trials, and finally repeated "purges". All of these measures substantiated the fears formulated a century earlier by authors who predicted what the consequences of welding Western communism with Eastern despotism would be. These consequences proved to be even more severe than those brought about by other totalitarianisms: those of the Nazis and the Fascists.

Put together, all these things created a picture of "Soviet hell", analyzed from various point of view by inter-war Polish authors, a picture removed from the one painted by the American diplomat Davies, living in Moscow from 1936 to 1938. He regarded the Soviet Union as a kind of *Sunday school for children where everyone is happy, gentle, polite, and good old uncle Joe* (Stalin), *sentimental as God the Father, even when murdering his political opponents, is doing something practically as innocent as picking*

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[6] I. Czuma, *Dzisiejsza filozofia prawa a romantyzm prawniczy*, Lublin 1930, p. 32; K. Grzybowski, *Ustrój Związku Socjalistycznych Sowieckich Republik. Doktryna i konstytucja*, Cracow 1929, p. 22; W. Sukiennicki, *Marksowsko-leninowska teoria prawa*, Vilnius 1934, p. 8.

spring flowers[7]. In fact, as early as the Autumn of 1939, in the initial stages of World War II, the *red reality of the Soviet hell* appeared in Poland, divided between nazi Germany and the "communist collectivity". The picture which had been so well recognized east of Poland was now replicated in our country, and lasted, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, for 45 years. In the "red hell" it is not only a question of crimes committed against innocent people under the authority of "communist law". For not only was the body under threat there, but perhaps primarily the soul. The injection of ideological content into many areas of the public sphere, especially education and the mass media, was much more harmful than the ideological attitude to politics and law. The former created havoc in minds, blurred the meanings of basic concepts, and made people forget the importance of individual independence and privacy. The latter only constituted the basis of the blind coercion justified by the projected goal, although even the communists themselves finally admitted that this goal was unachievable. The USSR, the country where a failed attempt at realizing the communist idea had been made on the basis of the rationalist and historicist formulas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, was formally dissolved on December 16, 1991, but the consequences of this attempt are still felt. Moreover, they are not only of an economic character, for in this sphere the countries formerly ruled by communists are gaining lost ground, even if power is held by members of the former nomenclature. They are not only of a political character: in this sphere the changes seem to have been even more rapid than in the economic one. The fundamental "problem with communism" is of an intellectual nature and involves a decline of the sense that certain basic concepts describing the public sphere of human life are self-evident. It also involves the undermining of the "moral sense" and the abolition of the foundations on which trust and respect, indispensable attributes of political co-existence, once rested.

Communism, which had promised to fulfil all human dreams, gave rise to a totalitarian system which deprived all individuals of autonomy and independence, not only by gagging them and forc-

[7] I. Matuszewski, *Wybór pism*, New York-London 1952, p. 184.

ing them to remain silent, but also by imposing a specific outlook and antagonizing individuals. It gave rise to a system which fulfilled the predictions of mid-nineteenth-century critics: availing itself of noble justifications, it created human beings distrustful of each other. It built an apparatus of power which put all spheres of life under tight control, which employed secret police and an elaborate network of informers. This apparatus inspired hostile relations in the workplace and in the family and destroyed the family, just as it destroyed other traditional intermediate structures: Churches and universities, local and professional communities.

The idea called communism, when put into practice, turned out to be not so much a fulfillment of human dreams, but a justification of a system which reduced man to an almost bestial state. Instead of being associated with an act of emancipation, it gave rise to a system which according to many Polish critics was more degrading that fascism or nazism. This system not only killed, but also crushed man, robbed him of his identity, of the awareness of basic concepts, dignity, and knowledge. It not only killed many but also debilitated those who survived. It not only robbed, but also made human growth impossible. Despite the promises of its adherents, it did not "elevate man", but "lowered" him to a level where he had never been before, excluding perhaps times of slavery. Instead of a collective pursuit of a far-reaching goal, it created a great camp in which individuals struggling against one another were enclosed. It created a Bolshevik collectivity instead of a state – a collection of rules arbitrarily adopted by those who had defined the noble purpose and nominated themselves for selecting the means of realizing that purpose, instead of law as a nexus of fixed norms of behavior, binding for everyone, even the organs of coercion. These are just a few of the contradictions between the promise and its fulfillment. The abolition of these contradictions became the cause of many Polish critics of communism, not only of those who regarded communism as "absolute evil" and refused to have anything to do with its advocates, but also of those who wanted the rulers to drop ideology in favor of simple "economic and political interests". Along with those who adopted the popular language of "democracy" and "human rights", the latter ceased to

perceive communism as an "anthropological mistake" and started seeing it as a "political mistake". This qualification, perhaps justified in the face of changes in contemporary postmodernist culture, dominated by relativism, nominalism, utilitarianism, and rationalism, emphasizing the instrumental character of human intellect with regard to his "practical needs", contributed in large measure to the "softening" of communism in Poland. It also convinced many that by shaking off the chains of ideology, by forgetting about the noble purpose and means, the former champions of this ideology will turn into trustworthy participants of the political game. The question of whether ideology – whose purpose was, as many critics contend, to bring about a gradual degradation of the spirit – did cause an irreversible damage in its adherents remains open. Also unanswered is the question of whether it is enough to conclude that in some countries communism assumed a "human face" and that by merely implementing democratic mechanisms and respecting human rights it turned into something progressively more similar to the liberal democracies of the West. These questions belong for the most part to the political sphere, where there is no place for unequivocal answers. Perhaps limiting the poignant lesson of communism to the political dimension was justified when changing the institutional order or gaining access to power by various opposition circles was at stake. Yet it is not right to sum up the communist experience with a simple statement of its "political impropriety". It was much more dangerous than it seems to those who look at it from afar. It was much more dangerous from the point of view of those who lost not only their property, but also intellectual certainty, especially about the public sphere, about ethical categories, about the stability of law, about politics as serving the common good, and about God as the foundation of the sense of human life. Therefore, those who remembered the words of August Hlond, the Primate of Poland, about Christ's saving the people *from barbarism and devastation*[8] so keenly received the call of Pope John Paul II – who like them had experienced communism directly – to rediscover God in the "no man's land" and to understand that in communion with Him they will

[8] A. Hlond, *Przemówienie wygłoszone w Poznaniu w Środę Popielcową 1932 r.*, Poznań 1932, p. 6.

recover their humanity despite the darkness of the "communist hell" enveloping them. History testifies that the recovery of humanity preceded the 1980 explosion of "Solidarity", a mass movement of resistance against the ideologically minded communist elites.

What we, together with John Paul II, have considered as an "anthropological mistake", appeared less and less in the writings of Polish critics of communism, who preferred to reflect on human rights, methods of economic management, or democratic mechanisms. These subjects gained priority in the discourse dominant in the second half of the twentieth century. It seems, however, and let the materials presented here serve as a proof that it was the anthropological mistake which largely determined the symptoms of the disease and which also appeared in the political dimension. The anthropological mistake constitutes the foundations of the malaise that deprives man of his bond with the supernatural and with what is characteristic of deeply rooted communities. The "political mistake" followed from the adoption of a false notion of human nature. In this conception man is considered as reduced to his material dimension, determined in his actions, and subject to the power of those who lead him within the temporal framework towards the fulfillment of a political goal. The critics who adopted an ethical, rather than a political perspective, regarded this conception as a graver problem than "ideologization" of political life.

The present selection leaves many questions unanswered, but it allows us to grasp the principal positions in the debate that took place in Polish thought during at least 150 years. At first this debate was dominated by predictions that communism would destroy the cultural foundations of Christian Europe. Later it was later supplemented with detailed analyses that showed the consequences of the implementation of the communist idea formulated in the West by methods characteristic of Eastern despotism. Although filled with statistical data, these analyses did not lose sight of the main preoccupation, that the common European code of meaning and many traditional legal and political institutions might not survive. Finally, motivated by the need to regain access to public life, critics started to present communism as a kind of

"political mistake", although some of them, especially the more conservatively inclined, perceived much deeper strata of the "communist hell". The editors intend this anthology as an introduction to an informed reflection on the content of the communist idea, doctrine, and system, and on what was associated with the communist dream in various periods of Polish philosophical, legal, political, and economic thought. It should provoke the question of whether the concepts and phenomena, hopes and calamities connected with communism did enrich our awareness of the dangers that might appear in the cultural and political world. Perhaps they will be dismissed as nothing more than a demonstration that a two-centuries-long economic and political experiment aimed at perfecting man has failed. However, the aim of this work is above all to indicate that communism and its manifestations provoked the criticism of some of the most eminent representatives of Polish social and humanist thought, concerned about the possibility and then the reality of the communist outlook's being put into practice.

The precise sequence of the texts was determined largely by the time when they were written, which is of particular importance when we are dealing with attempts at describing and analyzing changes which occurred in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of Poland. We hope that this anthology will allow the English-speaking reader to become acquainted with this attitude. Moreover, we wish to dedicate this book to all those who were victims of those who believed in the possibility of realizing the communist vision or who worked for regimes which used the communist ideology as a justification for their actions. We wish to dedicate it to the memory of those who died at their hands or at their command and offer it to those who lost the fruit of their lifetime's work or who were deprived of much of their own heritage.